

5 Using machine translation as a parallel text to access literature for modern language learning

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Abstract

Parallel texts in the form of Graded Readers have a long tradition in foreign language learning. When presenting the translation in the reader's first language alongside the target language text, parallel texts offer access to literary texts, to their stories, characters, plot developments, and cultural content, without the need for time-consuming vocabulary or grammar searches, which would otherwise distract from the enjoyment of the texts. This chapter will describe and evaluate a teaching activity that makes use of Google translation as parallel text. This activity exploits the inconsistencies and obvious mistakes of the English machine translation as incentives to undertake close reading of the affected passages in the original foreign language text and to suggest a better translation. It allows beginners and intermediate students to benefit from the aesthetic qualities of literary texts while developing their grammatical accuracy and cultural understanding through focus on form. The evaluation of its effectiveness will be based on class discussions. Pedagogic translation exercises are used to promote deep engagement with the foreign language. At the same time, the students learn to appreciate the complexities of translation both as a process and as a product and develop a critical understanding of translated, especially machine translated, text. The opportunity to improve inferior machine translations while engaging

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with rich, multi-layered literary texts is shown to be a motivating activity for language learners, who also develop their digital literacy with an understanding of the shortcomings of machine translations.

Keywords: literature for language learning, translation for language learning, parallel texts, machine translations, translanguaging, digital literacy.

1. Introduction

Literary texts include a range of motivating and engaging features that make them particularly suited to the foreign language classroom. The long and continued popularity of Graded Readers in libraries and language centres is evidence of language learners' appreciation of literary texts for their learning. Students seek to access literature in the foreign language through simplified or even parallel texts in a familiar language which can either be their first language or another language they have learned. [Véronis \(2000\)](#) defines parallel text according to the computational linguistics community as “texts accompanied by their translations in one or several other languages” (p. xiii), which brings the traditional concept of Graded or Easy Readers into the 21st century. While aids that draw on the learner's linguistic knowledge of their existing repertoire of L1 and other L2s, such as parallel texts, have long been ignored in monolingual classrooms, they are here reconsidered for their ability to create translanguaging spaces that draw on the learners' existing skills to develop their understanding of the foreign language. For this reason, parallel texts can be useful from an early stage in the language learning process, even at A1 level. Beginners can rely on the translation for text comprehension and focus only on selected extracts in the foreign language text.

The proposed teaching project uses Google translations as parallel texts, to encourage students to notice differences between the first and second language grammar and vocabulary and thus sharpen their understanding of the foreign language. The fact that Google translations contain mistakes that are obvious

on the surface level can be an incentive for beginners to investigate that particular section in the foreign language text in more detail. Students at a higher proficiency level can be expected to start from the foreign language text and evaluate the entire translation. Most importantly, parallel texts enable students to engage with literary texts rather than the more mundane and less stimulating texts found in many textbooks.

2. Presentation of the project

The aesthetic quality of literary texts invites and rewards the close reading and deep engagement that is necessary for linguistic investigation and understanding. Kusch (2016) describes literature as “a set of texts [...] whose purpose includes, but extends beyond, communication, in which language itself is as much a part of the end product as is the content” (pp 3-4). Such texts can be a motivating and interesting addition to the language classroom. Furthermore, literary dialogues in particular exhibit features that are closer to authentic language use than scripted textbook dialogues (Jones & Oakey, 2019), making them particularly useful for the language learner who wishes to explore language use beyond the flatness of the codified standard used in most textbooks.

As authentic texts, literary texts also counteract the disconnectedness of the foreign language classroom that often comes with mundane and decontextualised controlled input (Widdowson, 1998). Dealing with the interface between individuals and society, they allow an insight into social and cultural aspects of the target language community. Fictional literary texts in particular “invite students to adopt different viewpoints and thus enhance intercultural awareness” (Almeida, Bavendiek, & Biasini, 2020, p. 2). At the same time, they deal with transcultural, essentially human themes and, as such, they encourage authentic communication between the text, the readers as learners, and the teacher. Hall (2020) explains that using literary texts challenges readers “to independent interpretations, learning, and creativity, with refreshed understandings of what language, culture or indeed literature might be” (p. 1).

Literary texts are particularly suited to language teaching in the 21st century, which, in its ambitions, should reach beyond the teaching of another standard language system. “Wider and more complex aims than simple language acquisition, including criticality, intercultural communication and empathy, creativity and innovation, independence, team working, ethics and emotional intelligence, and a host of other 21st century skills (Naji, Ganakumaran, & White, 2019, as cited in Hall, 2020, pp. 1-2) are fostered through the use of literature, drawing on the multilingual and multicultural space of the language classroom.

Using parallel texts in the form of Graded Readers is not a new idea. The popularity of Graded Readers amongst learners reflects the desire to engage with literary texts from an early stage in their learning. It is also evidence of many learners’ feelings that bi- or multilingual engagement with texts is conducive to their language learning. Graded Readers offer familiarity with story, characters, and plot, even if the students do not yet have the language skills to access the whole text in the target language. Graded Readers come in different forms, sometimes offering simplified versions of the original text, adjusted to the target readers’ proficiency levels, sometimes offering the translation alongside the foreign language text.

2.1. Using machine translations as parallel text

I would like to show how L1 machine translations can function as parallel texts, allowing students the pleasure of reading, of jumping in and out of the foreign language text, without the distraction of constant word or grammar searches. Learners or teachers can choose the direction of the work. Beginners are advised to start with the L1 machine translation and dive into the foreign language source text when questions arise, whereas more advanced students should start with the source text and comment on the L1 machine translation.

The problematic nature of machine translations, with their inconsistencies and obvious mistakes, is seen as an advantage in the proposed project, since it encourages students to close read affected extracts in the original foreign

language text and to suggest a better translation. Williams (2006) explains how the use of translation tools can sharpen the students' understanding of the complexity of language: "[i]f students can see that communicating in another language is not simply a matter of plugging words into a formula that can be calculated by a machine, they will begin to understand language and communication as complex and multi-layered" (p. 572). A critical awareness of the shortcomings of machine translations is also an important part of the students' digital literacy.

2.2. Creating translanguaging spaces for language learning

Exploring translanguaging spaces and "bringing students' languages into productive contact within multilingual classrooms" (Hélo, Frijns, van Gorp, & Sierens, 2018, p. vii) recognises the student as a competent multilingual speaker, drawing on existing competences rather than ignoring them. Critical reflections on translation open up this space for engagement with both languages.

However, the critical understanding of translation requires a high command of both the source language and the target language. Learners in their first year at university are usually working at CEFR² proficiency levels ranging from A1 for complete beginners to B2 for students coming in with very good A levels or equivalents. Struggling with basic comprehension difficulties, these learners are not easily able to engage in meaningful reflections on translations. Machine translations in English help them access the source texts in the language they are learning, texts which, in their full length and complexity, would be beyond the comprehensible input necessary for meaningful engagement with the language. Beginners usually work on short extracts in the foreign language, which they can embed in the wider context of the literary texts with the help of machine translations. At B2 level, translations in the learner's first language serve as comprehension aid to help them read the full texts in the source language at relative speed.

2. Common European Framework of Reference for languages

2.3. Teaching and learning activities

Following an introduction into translation difficulties, the students receive literary texts in the target language alongside their Google translations in English. They discuss the translations in class or in small groups in three consecutive seminar sessions, and then annotate the machine translation in their own time after the sessions. Based on these comments, more advanced students are encouraged to provide a better translation of the extracts they found badly translated.

The texts are selected for the translation difficulties they pose, enabling discussions on both form and content in the foreign language texts, as the students search for equivalents in the language they know. The texts include extracts from children's books, a coming-of-age novel, and song lyrics.

Starting with the Google translation, the students are asked to (1) identify poor and wrong translations; and (2) suggest more appropriate translation choices. In class, the students start with a diagnostic reading of the machine translated text, searching for inconsistencies and discordances in the translation. Sections identified as potentially wrong translations are compared to the source text. The in-depth understanding of the source text needed at this point is developed in discussions in class, drawing on previously taught knowledge about language. Based on this the students develop and defend new, better translations.

2.4. The study

The study is based on the experience with several small groups of first year German language learners from the academic year 2016/2017 to the academic year 2019/2020. The students are part of the language-specific seminar group in a linguistics module, applying their newly acquired knowledge about language in general to German in particular. The groups usually include both complete beginners and advanced language learners.

This study focuses on a set of activities around the song 'Currywurst' by Herbert Grönemeyer (1982). The song is a popular sing-along, describing a night-out

with two close friends eating fast food (currywurst) and getting drunk. In this particular activity, the attention is less on the obvious translation challenges implied in the song lyrics, such as rhyme and rhythm, but on the meaning and cultural content of the song and their representation in language. The intended learning outcome is an understanding of the transcultural nature of translation. The classroom discussion focuses on the roles of representation, transmission, and transculturation in the translation of “not only material cultural elements, but also signs, symbols, codes, beliefs, values, ideas, ideals and ideologies” (Tymoczko, 2007, cited in Laviosa, 2014, p. 82).

The effectiveness of the activities, apparent in the quality of the students’ reflections, is evaluated based on class discussions and the students’ annotated translations. The study aims to answer the following questions.

- Are students able to notice ungrammatical or wrong Google translations?
- Are students able to meaningfully reflect on the discrepancies between the source text and the target text regarding the identified extracts?
- Does the Google translation provide sufficient understanding and context to engage with the literary extracts with a view of the entire text?

3. Discussion of outcomes

The set of activities led to active engagement with the texts and lively discussions throughout. The students seemed eager to find obvious mistakes in the machine translated English texts. Many ungrammatical, nonsensical, or clumsy translations were identified and sparked an in-depth engagement with the German source texts.

Drawing on the example of the song lyrics, all learners found at least some obvious mistakes in the Google translation. In particular, the high number of

untranslated German words in the English text, due to non-standard forms in the original, prompted students to find the passage in the source text, look up the words where necessary, discuss the intended meaning, and attempt a better translation. Wrong prepositions and pronouns, as well as mistranslated words and idioms, were often noticed and corrected.

However, the identification of translation mistakes was almost entirely based on the English translation. Mistakes which were not apparent at surface level in the English text itself were sometimes overlooked. For example, the translation ‘right blue’ for ‘richtig blau’ was corrected as ‘very drunk’ or something similar, by many, but not all learners. Some learners failed to notice this translation mistake, since feeling blue makes at least some sense in the English text.

Based on the close reading of the individual passages, the learners successfully identified defining textual features, such as colloquial dialect forms and words, the use of rhyme and rhythm for humorous purposes, and the comic, light-hearted, and entertaining nature of the song. After watching a performance of the song on video, they noticed its popular appeal in German society, which relies on the audience knowing the lyrics and singing along. The learners appreciated the text as ‘informal’, ‘relatable’, and containing ‘realistic dialogues’, confirming Jones and Oakey’s (2019) finding that literary texts are particularly suitable in the language classroom due to their authentic language use.

The most worthwhile reflections revolved around the cultural context of the song. Although none of the students were able to pinpoint the dialect or its cultural connotations, they nevertheless noted the significance of the use of dialect and colloquialisms in the song. This in relation to the overall meaning of the lyrics, the description of two men eating fast food and getting drunk after a shift, led to rich discussions based on the comparison between British and German cultures. The students identified similarities as well as differences, which resulted in some excellent suggestions for better translations. For example, the line ‘kerl scharf ist die wurst/mensch dat gibt’n durst, die currywurst’ is translated by Google as ‘guy spicy is the sausage/human dat

that's thirst, the currywurst'. All students were able to correct the most obvious mistakes, including the wrong nuance of the translation 'human' for 'Mensch' in this context. However, the deeper understanding of the cultural background of the lyrics enabled them to suggest choices beyond the most obvious 'man', including 'mate', 'pal' and 'lad'. In addition, the students were now able to see the importance of a consistent use of dialect, sparking discussions around British regions comparable to the Ruhr metropolis in which the source text is placed, as well as working class cultures in both countries. This led to some interesting choices for the translation of 'currywurst', a traditional German street food, including 'kebab', 'pie'n peas' or 'cheesy chips'. 'Beer', on the other hand, was considered to be a suitable equivalent for 'Bier' in German. Some particularly innovative translations transposed the song to a British region, for example Yorkshire, Liverpool, or Essex, aiming for consistency in the chosen dialect features, foodstuffs, names etc. 'Hammered' was now defended as a more suitable choice for 'richtig blau'. 'Eddie' was suggested as a name replacement for 'Willi', drawing on the patriotism in both names. Colloquial and short forms were imitated according to the chosen dialect, and 'us' was suggested to replace 'me'.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study suggest that students actively engage with both languages if a machine translation is taken as a starting point rather than the end product in their learning. They seem to enjoy the activities and develop an increasing awareness of mistranslations, based on the ever-closer reading of the text. Considering the proficiency level of the students, which ranges between A1 and B2, they engage with the literary text in the foreign language at a level of analysis that would be difficult to achieve without the scaffold of the parallel text. The shortcomings in the translation seem to be a motivating factor, inspiring the students to attempt better translations. Once they realise that the machine translation is found wanting, their confidence grows to read the foreign language source text more closely and to suggest L1 reformulations of the machine translated text. Comparing different suggestions, they understand

the complexities of translation as a process and develop a critical view of translations as products.

Since this involves a deep understanding of the literary texts, their textual features, purposes, and cultural contents, the suggested activities promote not only an understanding of selected structures, words, and idioms of the language the students are learning, but also of the aesthetic qualities of the texts. The richness and aesthetic nature of the literary texts make these exercises particularly rewarding, offering several levels of analysis and multiple interpretations.

Based on these results, I conclude that imperfect machine translations used as parallel texts inspire students to engage with literary texts, with both their form and meaning. The tasks open space for translanguaging, allowing learners to draw on their familiar language and culture to contrast and compare with the target language. This increases their confidence and results in a creative, inspired engagement with the literary text. However, the fact that all discussions took place in English and that many comments were concerned with the English translation rather than the source text in the target language places the focus on linguistic knowledge and may not leave sufficient room for language practice and meaning making. To adapt these activities for language classes I would therefore recommend more scaffolded exercises, some of which should be conducted in the target language to encourage language practice and meaning making.

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